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THE SEARCH FOR HEALTH

A Report from
The National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland

An Overview of Breast Cancer

Breast cancer will occur in one of every 10 American women alive today. Since the early 1970s, breast cancer incidence rates have increased about 1 percent each year. In 1970, there were about 69,000 newly diagnosed cases of breast cancer—in 1990 there will be 150,000. Since 1973, the mortality rate has increased only slightly, about 1.5 percent. Despite increasing use of early detection and improved treatment strategies, the number of deaths from breast cancer increased from 30,000 deaths in 1970 to 44,000 in 1990.

Researchers are studying every aspect of the disease—its cause and prevention, early detection and diagnosis, treatment, and patients' quality of life.

Some of the highlights of breast cancer research and programs conducted or supported by the National Cancer Institute are as follows:

- Researchers are examining the relationship between dietary, nutritional, and lifestyle factors and breast cancer with the goal of preventing the disease. Further studies to determine if changes in diet can lower breast cancer risk are planned.
- A three-year investigation of the possible role of oral contraceptives, alcohol, and diet as risk factors for breast cancer in women was launched in 1989. About 5,000 women from across the United States will be involved in the study, which focuses on determining the influence of hormones and other factors on breast cancer risk in women under age 45. Women over the age of 45 are also involved in the study.
- A major research effort is underway to identify a gene or genes that predispose women in high-risk families to breast cancer.

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Research shows that widespread screening programs for women 50 and over can reduce breast cancer mortality by 30 percent. A new analysis of data from a previous study by the Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York published by NCI in 1988 showed that mammographic screening can also reduce breast cancer deaths in women age 40 to 49 by 24 percent. In June 1989, NCI and 10 other health care and medical specialty organizations met and agreed that women without symptoms should have an annual clinical breast examination with a mammogram every one to two years starting at age 40 to detect breast cancer. At age 50, both the clinical examination and mammography should be performed annually.

As new approaches to treatment are developed, quality of life is increasing in importance. Today, as a result of research, it is known that breast-sparing surgery-lumpectomy followed by radiation-is as effective as masectomy for patients with early-stage breast cancer. If detected in the early, localized stage, the five-year relative survival rate is 90 percent.

New treatments under study for patients with advanced breast cancer include giving high doses of multiple drugs, followed by bone marrow transplantation as a means of overcoming drug resistance. Clinical researchers are studying combination hormonal therapies to determine if they are more effective than single hormones used sequentially. Also, using hormones to "prime" cancer cells to become more susceptible to cancer drugs is being researched.

Large-scale communications programs are also under way to alert American women and their physicians to the importance of early detection and up-to-date treatment.

83-NCI-4/91

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